

Notes on Nehemiah: The Beginning of a Mission

By Prof. John Whitcomb, Grace Theological Seminary

It was in the month of December 445 B. C. that a small group of weary and discouraged men arrived at Susa, capital city of the great Persian Empire, after a 700-mile journey from the little province of Judah. Making their way through the crowded streets of the city, they finally reached the palace of King Artaxerxes and found there a man who would hear their sad account with sympathy and concern. This man was Nehemiah, the cupbearer to the king, yet a Jew like themselves, and one in whose breast stirred the heartthrob of the Psalmist, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning . . . if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy."

The Remnant in Exile

There had been men of like mind during those 140 long years of exile and reproach since the city of David and the magnificent temple of Solomon had been crushed under the heel of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. Even during the lifetime of that Babylonian monarch, it was Daniel's thrice-daily habit to open his window toward Jerusalem for prayer; and shortly after his time had come Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest with a small remnant to reestablish the temple-worship in the face of bitter opposition.

And 60 years after their time, we find Ezra, "the ready scribe in the law of Moses," burning with zeal for the spiritual welfare of his countrymen, bringing revival and repentance in Jerusalem. But Ezra's great work there was now 13 years in the past when Nehemiah's friends came to tell him of Jerusalem's tragic plight: "The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire."

A Heart for God

Do you know what most of us would have done if we had been in Nehemiah's place? We would have told those men, "I am certainly sorry to hear this, but you know those people back in Jerusalem deserve to

be in their present condition. Ezra warned them 13 years ago about mixing with heathen neighbors—and now look at them! Even if I could help, it's too late to do anything now."

If Nehemiah had been like most of the Pharisees of Christ's day, or even like some Christians in our own day, such an answer might have been expected. But Nehemiah said no such thing! Notice his response: "I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven." Fortunately the main content of his prayer has been recorded for us by the Spirit of God in the first chapter of



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Nehemiah's book. Here are some of the elements of this outstanding prayer:

1. Complete trust in the glory and faithfulness of God (vs. 5).
2. Full self-identification with the sins of his people (6-7).
3. Pleading and claiming the promises of God's written Word (8-9).
4. Confident expectancy that his prayer would be answered (10-11).

The Opportunity Comes

Is there any wonder that God not only heard this prayer, but answered in a most remarkable manner, using Nehemiah himself as His instrument for the building of Jerusalem's walls? God delights to do the impossible, and to do it through impossibly weak vessels that are wholly yielded to Him. What a rebuke to an apostate, unbelieving people! One man of faith, plus God, and the whole life-course of a nation began to move in another direction!

Four months had passed since that

winter day when "certain men out of Judah" came to visit Nehemiah, and now, in the springtime of the year, the hand of God began to move events and circumstances to the accomplishment of His purposes, in answer to Nehemiah's prayer. How naturally it all came about! And yet, how clearly can the providence of God be traced through it all! For it came to pass that on a certain day King Artaxerxes noticed that Nehemiah, his cupbearer, was not as joyful as he formerly had been. "Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart." And so Nehemiah poured out his heart to the king, revealing to him his concern for the city of his fathers.

A King's Question

What difference would it make to the great Artaxerxes that a city in a distant and impoverished province of Persia "lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire"? Could the king possibly have realized what Jerusalem meant in the plan of God, or in the spiritual history of the world, or even in the heart of Nehemiah? Hardly so, and yet he answered in a way that far exceeded the fondest hopes of Nehemiah: "For what dost thou make request?"

For Such a Time as This

Like Queen Esther 35 years before, Nehemiah had "come to the kingdom for such a time as this." King Artaxerxes was waiting for his request, and Nehemiah, overwhelmed by the significance of the occasion, breathed a quick, yet earnest, prayer to God: "So I prayed to the God of heaven." God's interests were Nehemiah's interests, and so the bold request was voiced: "that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it." And so, with the king's permission, and with official letters in his hand, Nehemiah started out for Jerusalem on his life work. A mission had begun.

(Watch for the sequel to this article in an early issue of the *Brethren Missionary Herald*, entitled "The Completion of a Mission.")

Notes on Nehemiah: The Completion of a Mission

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(This article is a sequel to "Notes on Nehemiah: The Beginning of a Mission," which appeared in the February 9 issue.)

Just 90 years before King Artaxerxes sent Nehemiah back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and its wall, God had sent the angel Gabriel to announce to Daniel that such permission would be granted. This was to be the beginning date for the famous 70-weeks period of God's dealing with Israel, as found in the Book of Daniel, chapter 9. "Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks . . ." How majestic and unhurried are God's movements in history, and yet how precise and perfect! When Nehemiah began his long journey to the Holy City with royal letters in his hand, God's time-piece of prophecy began to tick off the years, to be interrupted by the official rejection of His Son, resumed at the beginning of the 70th week, yet future, and completed with the glorious second coming of Christ.

The Gigantic Task

But surely no such thoughts came into the mind of Nehemiah as he came to the city of his fathers to begin his life work of governor and wall-builder. Instead, he was immediately faced with the staggering task of rebuilding a ruined city inhabited by a discouraged people. The question might well have been asked—and probably was, in the mind of Nehemiah—what could one man do to help in such a situation, even if he did have letters from the king? The answer to this question is recorded for us in the Scriptures, and deserves to be counted as one of the greatest achievements in the annals of human history.

A Moonlight Ride

For 3 days following his arrival in Jerusalem, Nehemiah rested from his long journey, seeking, no doubt, the will of God for the days ahead. Then, without so much as suggesting

his plans to Israel's leaders, he arose in the night, mounted his horse, and with a few companions examined the ruins of Jerusalem's walls in the light of a brilliant moon, while the population of the city was wrapped in slumber and unconcern. The next morning, with great tact and a delicacy of approach that deserves to be studied, Nehemiah challenged the rulers of Israel to begin the work of rebuilding: "Come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach." How easy it would have been to denounce them for their sloth and to command



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them to rebuild their city. But Nehemiah had long since identified himself completely with the failures of his people, and his contagious enthusiasm brought an immediate and joyous response: "Let us rise up and build!"

The Attacks of Satanic Enemies

The work had begun! The people of God were on the march, under the flaming enthusiasm of a man who was sold out to the God of Israel! What a wonderful combination, and yet—as in every similar case in the history of God's people—Satan, that archenemy of every work of faith, was not dead. Stung into a frenzy of wrath by the success of Nehemiah, Satan and his servants began to hamper and to hinder on every side. Even before his arrival in Jerusalem, Nehemiah's enemies had sensed the beginning of trouble for their cause, and "it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel." With the work on the wall actually begun, however,

inner thoughts were turned into open words of ridicule and rage: "They laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king? . . . What do these feeble Jews? . . . if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall." How subtle are the methods of our Enemy!

In the case of some Christians, Satan's fiery dart of ridicule would be sufficient to put to silence the word of testimony—so why should he bother to use greater weapons? But Nehemiah was made of different material, so mockery was now exchanged for military attack and fifth-column infiltration: "Then they were very wroth, and conspired all of them together to come and fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it." But even as the first attack, ridicule, was met by prayer and determination, so now the second attack, physical interference, was met by preparation and watchfulness. It was now clear to the enemy that Nehemiah was no ordinary leader, so their three greatest weapons were now brought to bear upon him: compromise, false accusation, and finally, treachery. The subtlety of these Satanic attacks, and the remarkable answers of Nehemiah to each one of them is recorded for us with realistic vividness in the sixth chapter, and reminds us of that greater conflict nearly 500 years later: Christ and Satan in the wilderness of Judea.

A Precious Book

How many a pastor, wearied by daily conflicts with this same enemy that Nehemiah faced, could receive encouragement to carry on, by a study of this precious book! The same problems and discouragements must be faced, but the same God is mighty to bring victory through humble instruments that are wholly yielded to Him! "So the wall was finished . . . And it came to pass, that when all our enemies heard thereof, and all the heathen that were about us saw these things, they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God."